

Six Days in the War on Terror

As Commanders-in-Chief of our National Guards, we went to the Middle East during the Thanksgiving holiday to thank our men and women for their service, and to convey the support and appreciation of the citizens of Georgia, Kansas, Michigan, and Mississippi.

We returned with an overwhelming sense of pride in their contributions and our national effort to bring freedom and self-determination to the people of Iraq and Afghanistan. We support our troops, we support our strategy to return responsibility to the Iraqis and Afghans, and we look forward to freedom and prosperity in the region.

After seeing the accomplishments of our troops and the progress made by the Iraqis, we're convinced there will be a lot fewer American soldiers in Iraq this time next year.

The men and women of our nation's armed forces we visited in Qatar, Kuwait, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan are serving their nation and our national interests with pride and distinction. Throughout our six-day journey, we met motivated Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, and Marines. This first-hand opportunity to hear from commanders in the field and our troops

on the front lines gave us an increased appreciation for the objectives we seek and our progress in achieving them.

We knew their job was hard. What we did not know was how successful they have been. Mississippians told us that dangerous jobs they were doing six months ago are now being done in large areas by Iraqi Security Forces. Soldiers from Michigan serving in the Sunni triangle spoke of the toll improvised explosive devices (IEDs) are taking on their unit. But they also described how Iraqi forces are now securing major portions of the cities in their area. Combat engineers from Kansas shared anecdotes of protecting Iraqi roads and rebuilding schools. Conditions are much better than when they arrived eleven months ago. Georgians who left their farms to serve in Iraq restored fresh water irrigation to fields sabotaged by Saddam. This is the kind of news most Americans don't hear. It is the kind of progress that gives Iraqis hope. And it is the reason we return home more optimistic than when we left.

We went to a region of the world marked for decades by the worst kind of fear and despair. It is the kind of hopelessness that inevitably breeds hatred and violence. That violence targets us at home.

We saw hope coming to the region for the first time. Hope in the form of a democratic process in Iraq, aid to earthquake victims in Pakistan, new

roads in Afghanistan, and women taking an equal place in society across the region. Everywhere we saw that home. It came from our citizen soldiers; patriots who are willing to pay the ultimate price for freedom.

We asked troops what message they wanted us to bring back. “Tell my wife I love her” came up a lot; “Tell my kids I will bake them cookies when I come home” was another, “tell her all is well.” In all of this, there was another important message: “Tell them not to give up on us ... tell them we are winning.”

In two weeks, Iraqis will go to the polls to elect a permanent government. This democratic government will provide a political avenue, rather than fear and violence, to resolve differences and provide for the needs of the Iraqi people. We saw that the Iraqi Security Forces are building the capacity to protect their emerging democracy; which means soon large numbers of our troops will be returning home. The coming election is in many ways a culmination of what our troops have been fighting for.

We return home expecting that in the year following this election we will see a substantial reduction in the number of American troops in Iraq. We look forward to welcoming them home.

We were honored to have an opportunity to spend a few days with our citizen soldiers, who are bringing freedom and democracy to countries

Draft #5. Edits from Barbour, Perdue, and Sebelius

halfway around the world. We want them to know that they have support from all Americans and we are committed to care for their families until they are safe and sound at home.